

The School-Parent Relationship Across Different Income Levels

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to investigate how the school-parent relationship (volunteering, outreach, and communicating) in schools differs among the poverty level of students. One hundred eighty-nine middle school parents answered a parental involvement survey. Comparisons were made between the poverty level of students (free and reduced lunch) and the school-parent relationship. Parent respondents represented high and low poverty groups.

The school-parent relationship was categorized into three different variables; volunteering, outreach, and communicating. An independent sample t-test was conducted to compare the three variables. It was found that there was a significant difference in how schools communicate with parents from different income levels. Low income parents were less satisfied with the manner in which their child's school communicated with them. There was no significant difference in the other two variables (volunteering and outreach) across income levels. Cultural sensitivity training is recommended.

Introduction

The school-parent relationship can be defined in many ways. One vital component of this relationship is how parents interact with their child's school. This interaction can take place via at home activities or activities taking place at school. There are clear differences between parent participation at home and at school. There is also a clear distinction between the types of activities involved in both of these types of parent participation. "Parent involvement at school may include attending parent-teacher conferences, attending programs featuring students, and engaging in volunteer activities. Parent educational involvement at home may include providing help with homework, discussing the child's schoolwork and experiences at school, and structuring home activities" (Lee & Bowen, 2006, p. 194). The Elementary and Secondary Education Act (2001) identified parent involvement as a priority in the United States educational system because it was beneficial to students, especially low income students. These statements display the need for solid involvement of parents in their child's education. This study defined the school-parent relationship as how parents interact with their child's school rather than how the parent

interacts with the child regarding school. There are notable differences in the school-parent relationship across different income levels. The level of the school-parent relationship, specifically in the area of communicating has been shown to be more positive with non-poverty parents. Park and Holloway (2013) noted that a key aspect of developing a supportive school-parent relationship is establishing effective and frequent communication between home and school.

A common misconception is that poverty level parents do not want to be involved with their child's school. Several researchers have disproved this notion. Bauch & Goldring (1995), explained that a family's poverty level impacts the school-parent relationship and Chavkin (1989) noted that poverty level parents want to be involved as much as non-poverty level parents in school activities and decision making. There are specific reasons why impoverished parents are not as involved as economically stable parents. Parents may desire to become more involved with their child's school but certain cultural factors may hinder them from feeling comfortable participating. Park and Holloway (2013) found it is likely that ethnic/racial differences in the school-parent relationship result in part from differences in the poverty levels of the parents.

This study examined how the school-parent relationship (communicating, volunteering and outreach) in schools differed among the poverty levels of students. This study is important because it is imperative that schools are aware of how the poverty level of the students impacts the school-parent relationship.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to examine how the school-parent relationship differs between the poverty level of students. The study is important because it can increase awareness about factors that can strengthen the school-parent relationship. This study evaluated the importance of volunteering, outreach, and communicating on the school-parent relationship across income levels.

This study defined the school-parent relationship as how parents interact with their child's school rather than

how the parent interacts with their child regarding school. This study focused on the differences between the school-parent relationship between non-poverty and poverty level parents. It is important to explore the obstacles that exist in creating strong school-parent relationships among different income levels and to determine how to improve these relationships.

Research Question

How does the school-parent relationship (volunteering, outreach, and communicating) differ between poverty and non-poverty levels?

Theoretical Framework

For the purpose of this study, the review of the research literature is divided into the following topical headings: volunteering, outreach, and communicating.

Volunteering

Volunteering is one aspect of the school-parent relationship where parents can be involved with their child's school. Eccles & Harold (1993) and Harris & Goodall (2008) found that studies have shown that students whose parents volunteer in their schools are more successful in their academic performance. In addition, students engage more in classroom activities and have a more positive mindset when they have actively involved parents (Mo & Singh, 2008), are more positive about school and learning (Shumow & Miller, 2001), and are more likely to enroll in honors classes (Henderson & Mapp, 2002). This is the case for students whose parents are in all income levels.

However, there is a difference in the manner in which the school communicates when the parent is from a level of poverty and when the parent is from a level of non-poverty or is considered economically stable. This often creates barriers for impoverished parents who may wish to volunteer in their child's school. Cullingford and Morrison (1999) explained the ways in which schools sanction parent involvement. However, when parents who come from poverty level incomes volunteered, their efforts were disregarded as per Lareau and Horvat (1999). Wallace (2013) stated that "parents would like to be more involved at the school and at home, but feel schools only encourage their passive support and they 'ought not to interfere with the job of teaching school curricula" (Smrekar & Cohen-Vogel, 2001, p. 90).

Furthermore, Wallace (2013) mentioned that "when each of these poverty level parents expressed their concerns about their child's school, such as the faculty's inability to meet the needs of ethnic minority children (who were included in the poverty category), the faculty's low expectations of Black children, and the faculty's unwillingness to test Black children for either learning disabilities or accelerated education programs,

their voices were silenced, their concerns overlooked, and their involvement criticized" (Wallace, 2013, p 196). This would indicate that parents may feel as if teachers diminish the importance of an impoverished parent's volunteer work because they have a low income; thus rendering the parent incapable of assisting their child educationally.

Outreach

Outreach is vital in building the school-parent relationship. Schools work better with consistent school-parent relationships. Research indicates that positive school-parent relationships make schools stronger. According to Henderson and Berla (1994) the most effective school-parent relationships occur when parents, especially those in low-income communities, partner with schools and the local community.

The inability to outreach to all parents may unintentionally exclude some students from receiving the benefits of a strong school-parent relationship. Schools use various methods to reach parents. However, "schools often have difficulty effectively bringing low-income, diverse parents onto school campuses even when they are involved in their children's education in the home" (O'Donnell, 2008, p.147). School-initiated parent outreach activities are very effective in targeting parents. The school-parent relationship is significantly stronger in schools that participate in numerous outreach methods. However, this outreach is not as effective when poverty level parents are involved. Frew (2012) identified the groups that are often unresponsive to school-initiated outreach activities. Those groups included: older students, non-Caucasian students, students from non-two-parent households, and students from lower income households. Schools often plan outreach programs that are targeted to non-poverty level parents not realizing aspects of this outreach may actually exclude poverty level parents.

School outreach programs that focus on community involvement are another outreach effort that schools can use to reach poverty level parents. These parents are not opposed to participating in activities that incorporate community involvement in the school-parent relationship but their main focus is usually on programs that would benefit their own child's learning and home environment. Frew (2012) stated that lower participation rates were not differentially higher in schools that offered a greater number of parent outreach activities. Therefore, it is not only important for schools to have various outreach methods but for schools to determine the types of outreach programs that are an effective means in reaching poverty level parents. O'Donnell (2008) discussed the results from a study that was done to determine the most effective types of outreach; the top suggestions were presentations at school meetings, outreach by involved consumers, and sign-up fairs in front of the school. Community organizations can be used as outreach partners with the schools as well. Local churches and community centers can be used as

intermediaries between the school community and parents. Furthermore, Smith (2006) suggested that partnerships with local agencies, businesses, and churches can increase parent involvement of low-income families. In short, an alternative to offering more programs could be focusing resources on improving the programs and outreach efforts that schools have found to be most effective. Many low income parents face barriers that prohibit them from being responsive to outreach efforts. There is a large segment of this population that does not speak English and even more that do not have appropriate childcare to attend some of these activities. Strong and effective outreach efforts allow parents, students, and the community to work together to improve the school-parent relationship.

Frew's (2012) research determined that the school-parent relationship was weaker in schools in which a higher percentage of students received free lunch and stronger in schools where numerous outreach activities were available. This research shows some results that may be alarming but could help schools increase outreach efforts tremendously. With some creativity and insight, outreach efforts can be appropriately customized to successfully reach poverty level parents.

Communicating

Communicating is the most pivotal factor in the school-parent relationship. "In today's society, schools and parents are responding to increased expectations, economic pressures, and time constraints" (Graham-Clay, 2005, p 117). Having strong communication is fundamental because it helps to build a sense of community between the school and home. Epstein (1995) described communicating with parents as one of the six major types of school-parent relationship practices critical to establishing strong working relationships between teachers and parents. Creating and building teacher-parent relationships is considered vital for both the development of schools and communities.

Involving families in the educational process is such an important and fundamental part of the school-parent relationship. School communication practices have increased by promoting teacher preparation and professional development programs to enhance the development of communication skills for teachers. Different avenues of communicating consist of one-way communication wherein "teachers seek to inform parents about events, activities, or student progress through a variety of sources" (Graham-Clay, 2005, p 118) and a two-way communication that involves interactive dialogues throughout the school year between teachers and parents. By incorporating both strategies, teachers will help to maximize sharing information with parents.

Since there are barriers that can restrict good communication from occurring between teachers and parents, educators have to understand that these barriers may exist at several levels and be able to address them appropriately. In order to create strong school parent partnerships,

it is essential to incorporate effective communication skills to help encourage open communication. Graham-Clay (2005) asserted that every communication exchange regardless of format, should reflect a thoughtful, planned approach and should be viewed as an opportunity for teachers to promote parent partnerships and ultimately to support student learning.

When parents are involved in their children's education out of school, their children do well academically. Many researchers have found associations between family factors and teacher-child relationship factors and academic performance and school outcomes, respectively (Englund, Egeland & Collins, (2008) (e.g., Burchinal, Peisner-Feinberg, Pianta, & Howes, 2002; Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Jimerson et al., 2000; Tucker et al., 2002; Vitaro, Larocque, Janosz & Tremblay, 2001). A teacher's competence of being able to have these communication skill sets is the primary resource for establishing an effective partnership with the family-school. Teacher-parent communications are most often described as the most important part of the school-parent relationship.

Communicating is a vital tool that educators have and they should exhibit extreme confidence when communicating with parents. As Gartmeier et al. (2016) states, in fact, teachers have to interact in professional ways in a multitude of different situations with (groups of) students, colleagues, parents as well as with external stakeholders of school education (e.g. representatives of political or economic institutions). "The degree to which parents get actively involved in school partnership practices is robustly predicted by different teacher variables, namely their sensitivity towards aspects related to parents' ethical and multicultural background" (Dotger, 2010) and their parent communication competencies (Denessen et al., 2009; Symeou et al., 2012).

If teachers manage to establish and maintain positive and functional relationships with parents, then students will benefit academically and socially. By doing this, teachers allow parents to give them feedback and allow for their perspectives and observations to be acknowledged. This helps shape and influence the communication with teachers and parents. Understanding students better is another extremely important factor that is important when stressing communication within the school-parent relationship. It helps teachers to get a complete picture of their students so that they could better understand them and provide them with positive support.

Equally important are parents' attitudes because if they feel as if their involvement is not taken into consideration by teachers or the school they are less likely to get involved and more likely to resist getting involved. Teachers should develop positive attitudes towards parental involvement and be able to establish a positive interpersonal relationship with parents. This communication between students and parents will help to strengthen the school-parent relationship.

For the purpose of this study, the definitions of the following terms provided meaning throughout the study.

Volunteering

Volunteering is recruiting and organizing parent help and support (Rotunda, 2005, p. 12). For the purposes of this paper volunteering includes examples of ways in which parents suggested opportunities to volunteer, but their suggestions were rejected by the economically stable teachers (Wallace, 2013).

Outreach

Outreach is a type of parental involvement. "Outreach programs help increase the incidence of parental involvement and higher performing schools regularly engage parents of various social backgrounds with coordinated programs that recognize and respect family needs and share responsibility and power" (Rotunda, 2005, p.45).

Communicating

Communicating is "design effective forms of school-to-home and home-to-school communications about school programs and their children's progress" (Rotunda, 2005, p. 12).

Poverty income level

Poverty income level refers to "the eligibility of the family to receive free or reduced meals from the Federal School Meals Program" (U.S. Department of Education 2003a, p. 2). For the purpose of this study, poverty level was categorized as free or reduced lunch participation or non-free or reduced lunch participation (Rotunda, 2005, p.10).

Non-poverty income level

Non-poverty income level refers to the eligibility of the family to pay for their child or children's lunch. Economically stable is another term utilized within the paper to define non-poverty income level.

School-Parent Relationship

The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) definition of school-parent relationship was as follows:

1. That parents play an integral role in assisting their child's learning;
2. That parents are encouraged to be actively involved in their child's education at school;
3. That parents are full partners in their child's education and are included, as appropriate, in decision making and on advisory committees to assist in the education of their child; and
4. That other activities are carried out, such as those described in section 1118 of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA) (school-parent relationship). (Department of Education, 2004, p. 3).

Epstein's Parental Involvement Types

Parental involvement consisted of six types of activities which are generalized under the headings: Parenting, Communicating, Volunteering, Learning at Home, Decision Making, and Collaborating with the Community (Epstein, 2001).

Methodology

This study is part of a larger study prepared by Dr. Robert Rotunda (2005). Dr. Rotunda analyzed variables that dealt with parental involvement at school and at home. Dr. Rotunda's survey instrument development was based on the work of Epstein and Salinas (1993), Epstein, Connors, and Salinas (1993), and Berla, Garlington, and Henderson (1993). The purpose of Dr. Rotunda's (2005) survey was to explore parental involvement attitudes. Rotunda's (2005) survey constructs were based on, "Epstein's Parental Involvement Types: Parenting, Communicating, Volunteering, Learning at Home, Decision Making, and Collaborating with the Community," (Rotunda, 2005, p 8).

Dr. Rotunda's (2005) study was conducted in a suburban Long Island, New York middle school which contained a wide variety of socioeconomic and racial/ethnic categories of students. Subjects for the study were 189 eighth grade parents in this suburban Long Island, New York middle school. The middle school was comprised of approximately 500 students per grade for a total of 1,486 students in the sixth, seventh and eighth grades in the 2003-2004 school year (as cited in Rotunda, 2005, p.52). The population was predominantly made up of 5.5 percent American Indian, Alaskan, Asian or Pacific Islander; 11.7 percent Black (not Hispanic); 13.7 percent Hispanic; and 69.2 percent White (not Hispanic) in the 2002-2003 school year. "Students eligible for Free or Reduced Lunch comprised 22.7 percent of population in the same year" (Rotunda, 2005, p 52). Free or reduced lunch was used as the operational definition of poverty level.

Instruments

Rotunda's (2005) survey was answered by 189 middle school parents. This particular study focused on the variables of Rotunda's survey that were part of the school-parent relationship (volunteering, outreach, and communicating). The objective of this particular study was to determine how the school-parent relationship factors of volunteering, outreach, and communicating differ among the poverty level of the parents involved. Using SPSS, an independent sample t-test was used to analyze this data to contrast the level of poverty the outlying variables. Cronbach alpha coefficients variables ranged from .62 to .81.

An independent - samples t-test (**Table 1**) was conducted to determine if there was a significant difference between the school-parent relationship (volunteering, outreach, and communicating) across income levels.

Table 1 - Data Analysis (Design & Procedures)***Student Parent Relationship factors across income levels***

		<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>SEM</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>
Volunteering	Non Poverty	152	27.53	3.79	3.07	-0.13	177.00	0.90
	Poverty	27	27.62	3.89	7.49			
Communicating	Non Poverty	153	21.71	2.104	1.70	2.15	180.00	0.03
	Poverty	29	20.75	2.68	4.97			
Outreach	Non Poverty	135	17.96	2.33	2.00	-1.04	159.00	0.30
	Poverty	26	18.50	2.96	5.82			

The test was significant in Communicating (MP=20.75, MNP=21.71) $p < 0.05$, $T(180) = 2.15$. The results were significant at the .05 level. The test was not significant in the areas of volunteering (MP=27.67, MNP=27.53) and outreach (MP=18.5, MNP=17.96). The results were not significant at the .05 level.

Conclusion & Recommendations

In conclusion, when analyzing the school-parent relationship between parents' income levels, the data presented in this paper shows significance in the area of communicating across income levels. The school-parent relationship among income levels is similar in the areas of outreach and volunteering. Non-poverty parents tend to have more positive attitudes about communicating and more direct communicating with their child's school. It is important to identify why poverty level parents do not respond to school outreach efforts at the same level as non-poverty parents. Frew's (2012) research determined that the school-parent relationship was weaker in schools in which a higher percentage of students received free lunch and stronger in schools where numerous outreach activities were available. Even though the data presented in this paper did not show significance in the areas of volunteering and outreach, the literary review displayed data and research which is contrary to the data in this paper. There is significance in the areas of volunteering, and outreach. With regard to volunteering, Cullingford and Morrison (1999) explained the acceptable ways in which schools sanction parent involvement. However, when parents who come from poverty level incomes volunteered, their efforts were dismissed and disregarded as per Lareau and Horvat (1999). A way to ameliorate this practice is to have teachers engage in poverty simulation training. This seminar is offered through teacher centers such as the Mid-Eastern

Suffolk Teachers Center (MESTRACT) located in Long Island, NY. It provides a way for teachers to develop empathy for people from impoverished backgrounds. This could assist teachers with understanding that the contributions from all students and parents are important regardless of their socioeconomic status.

These findings also call for cultivating cultural competency. This can be provided to teachers and administrators by social work agencies such as the JenTex Counseling Agency. Trainers can come to faculty meetings or meet with departments in schools to bring forth awareness of other cultures. If utilized effectively, this will benefit parents from cultures which are historically disenfranchised. This training can then also be used to foster relationships with parents from several cultures and socioeconomic levels.

Most importantly, schools need to continue to find ways to get all parents involved in their child's school, especially poverty level parents. It has been determined by this research study that poverty level parents want to be involved in their child's education but may not be comfortable getting involved or do not even know how to become involved. Schools need to use ways such as cultural sensitivity training and community involvement to increase volunteering, outreaching, and communicating efforts for all parents across different income levels.

When schools take the time to include the contributions from parents at all income levels, even the historically disenfranchised, they can empower all students to maximize their potential. Or, in the Gestalt paradigm, the whole is worth more than the sum of its parts; the child and his/her parents from all income levels and their contributions are valuable.

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